



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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Students as Playwrights?

Our students do not like writing persuasive essays, and few of us like reading them. Yet each semester we ask thousands of college freshmen to prove their argumentative skills. We ask them to pick a major contemporary issue—e.g., gun control, abortion, euthanasia—and argue for one side or the other.

Sounds simple, but something strange happens when our students try to write persuasively. They submit essays that lack passion and unity. Papers are long on direct quotations and short on substance. The relevance of each issue remains buried under a mountain of facts and citations. At home we suffer through the thick stack, wondering where we went wrong, asking ourselves why all of the writing sounds generic. Our students go through the motions of research writing and end up producing essays with no sense of purpose or audience.

But the persuasive essay does not have to be the most dreaded event of the semester. Students can generate their own list of current issues; they are less likely to write dispassionately about ideas they have themselves. However, some potential issues could be offered for their consideration: for example,

- Should standardized tests be used to measure intelligence?
- Should high schools provide day care for teen mothers?
- Should all U.S. citizens be required to speak English?
- Should fighting be allowed in professional hockey?
- Should certain albums come with warning labels on them?
- Should the Miss America pageant ditch the swimsuits?
- Should condoms be made available in public schools?

The possibilities are endless. For fun, tell students they are going to write a one-act, one-scene play (brace yourself for the collective groan). Have them choose an issue from the class list and, in a short dialogue, create two fictional characters to debate that issue. Finding a title and a scene before they begin this dialogue is usually helpful. For example:

Books or Babies?

Scene: Noon, a high school cafeteria. Two girls—one of them visibly pregnant—are standing in the lunch line.

Alicia: Hey, girl, how come you haven't called me lately?

Gwen: I don't know. I guess I've been busy.

Alicia: You embarrassed to be seen with me?

Gwen: No, it's just that I think you should take your classes more seriously. Do you know you're only two points away from flunking algebra?

Alicia: Hey, after I deliver this baby I'm gonna have all the time I need for school. They're talking about setting up a day care her for those of us with children.

Gwen: Wait a minute. They cut girls soccer but they can afford day care for irresponsible students?

Alicia: Irresponsible? I happen to need my high school diploma to succeed in this world. If I don't get it I'm just going to make my child repeat the same cycle of poverty and ignorance that I'm trying to escape.

Gwen: Okay, but wouldn't such a facility encourage more kids to have babies out of wedlock?

We are not talking Shakespearean tragedy here, just a simple page of dialogue. I give my students about 30 minutes to write; they rarely need more than that.

Next, ask for volunteers to perform the plays in front of the class. Let the playwrights cast characters based on appearance, personality, or whatever. It is important for the students to see the issue in a social context. These dialogues will boost class participation, encourage discussion, and spark healthy debates. The role-playing is fun and requires students to consider both sides of the issue.

This activity is also a form of brainstorming and prewriting. Most of my students leave class with an outline or a discovery draft. And, instead of running off to loot the library, they tap into their knowledge and experiences, which in turn personalizes their essays.

This exercise need not be limited to composition courses. It works within other curricula, too—e.g., political science, ethics, and sociology. I often feel



guilty about using this activity—it involves absolutely no preparation time, no teaching (in the traditional sense of the word), and no grading. But the essential element here is not the teaching; it is the *learning*. With this exercise your students will not even realize they are forming opinions, thinking critically, and drafting their persuasive essays.

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Class Pictures and Collaboration: Creating Support Groups

Students in organic chemistry at Central Florida Community College have a significant problem: as CFCC is the only college in town, they lack a support group of students who have had these or other advanced chemistry courses. Upper-class and graduate students are nonexistent. My students have a wide diversity of backgrounds and abilities, and many need exceptional motivation to be successful in an advanced course.

Although students depend heavily upon me, they must also learn to work together and learn from each other. One of the things that I do to promote a sense of community is to take a class picture at the beginning of the term. Like so many great ideas, it was originally suggested by the students. I take the picture and frame an 8x10 print for my office wall. Many students want reprints of their own. I find this helps them begin the course on the right foot—students get a sense of belonging.

Immediately, I provide impetus for group work by assigning homework problems which would be very difficult to work individually, and then I strongly encourage students to collaborate. Since our college services a three-county area and my students have varied schedules, the most practical method of forming study groups is to let them decide upon group membership, meeting places, and other details. I circulate an information sheet on which they write (voluntarily) their address, phone number, and schedule; and then I make the list available to the class. I have found that students are soon spending time studying together, even when no assignment has been made. I reinforce this interest by holding pizza parties after class, and students organize activities outside of class.

My class completion percentages are high, and my

students are successful in follow-on courses. For example, the only professional school entrance examination which has a separate section for organic chemistry is the DAT (Dental Aptitude Test); none of my students has ever scored below the 82 percentile on the organic chemistry section. Currently, three of my organic students are in dental school, and two were accepted directly into dental school without other pre-dental studies.

The successes of all my students indicate that developing a sense of camaraderie among classmates encourages and promotes individual successes.

Support groups, shared learning, and extracurricular activities go a long way toward smoothing the transition to and improving student performance in the difficult follow-on courses.

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